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# Test Every Prophecy: Ignatian Helps for Pauline Discernment

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**S**everal fine scholarly and popular works have treated the phenomenon and history of prophecy in the Old and New Testament, throughout Church history, and in its revival in charismatic renewal today.<sup>1</sup> Building on this material, this article will focus on one major problem regarding prophecy: *how does one discern whether or not prophecies are genuine?* This problem is one aspect of the more universal issue about discerning genuine from inauthentic claims to religious experience. Much of what is here said about prophecy applies also to other situations and religious experiences. But because the discerning of prophecies is reemerging today as an important pastoral problem, especially in charismatic renewal, it is a form of discernment worth special focus.

An important contemporary controversy, for example, surrounds the stream of prophecies in the Catholic charismatic renewal that began at the

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<sup>1</sup>The best popular overview I know is Bruce Yocum, *Prophecy* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1976). Popular articles especially helpful for this article are Thomas L. Bill, C.S.C., "At Home with Prophecy," and Tom and Lyn Scheuring, "Responding to Prophecy," *Catholic Charismatic* 2 (Oct/Nov, 1977), pp. 4-8, 8-11; and a series on the controversial Rome prophecies treated in this article: Bruce Yocum, "He Has Not Spoken in Secret," and Kevin Ranaghan, "How Should We Respond?" *New Covenant* 7 (Feb, 1978), pp. 4-9, 10-13, and Kevin and Dorothy Ranaghan, "God's Warning, God's Remedy," and Bruce Yocum, "A Time for Intercession," *New Covenant* 9 (May, 1980), pp. 13-16, 17-21.

Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (Jewish Publication Society, 1962), is a profound, inspirational Jewish reflection on Hebrew prophecy.

closing Mass in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome for the international conference of 10,000 on May 19, 1975. Prophecies at that Mass foretold "days of darkness," for which repentance, change of life and preparation were needed. The many prophecies that have followed in this vein have changed the direction of Catholic charismatic renewal. They have weaned it from fascination with spiritual gifts and called it to a deeper conversion, growth and maturity.<sup>2</sup>

But they have also been strongly criticized as "gloom and doom" prophecies. Many have objected to their at least apparent harshness.

Regarding prophecies, however, the issue can only be whether or not they are genuine—that is, whether or not they are from God. If they are messages from God, who are we to question whether they speak gloom or joy? The question in prophecy is not tone or style, but "What is its source?" There are many authentic prophecies in Scripture that are far more harsh than those in dispute today. Without a real process of discernment, it would seem impossible to reject certain prophecies a priori, just because of their tone or content—unless they are clearly seen to violate objective norms such as Scripture, orthodoxy, love, or the building up of the Church. Therefore this article asks how prophecies not only are tested against objective norms, but are discerned for their spiritual validity.

Our presupposition is that the evidence of both Old and New Testaments is essential for evaluating contemporary prophecy, as this conversely helps to interpret the spiritual evidence. We can here treat only that biblical evidence which bears directly on discernment of prophecies. The thorny problem of evaluating prophecies will hopefully receive increased insight through the reciprocal interpretation of Scripture and charismatic prophecies.

Because the problem of inauthentic prophecies did not meet a consistent and satisfactory solution throughout the history of the early Church, the "mainline" churches finally suppressed prophecy in the third century. A more effective safeguard against its abuse is needed today if prophecy is not to be suppressed again.

The main contention of this article is that St. Paul found the core of the solution, but, since his letters gave little explanation of how to apply this discovery, his approach to discernment was lost in the second century.

I will further suggest that in the intervening centuries, the Church has developed a body of wisdom which can be applied to discerning prophecies as they reappear today. This wisdom includes methods and spiritual gifts needed to implement Paul's approach without irreverence to God's Spirit—which was the fear that hampered the testing of prophecy in the second century prior to its suppression.

The writings of the mystics and the Church's highly developed traditions of spiritual theology provide many concrete ways to discern religious experi-

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<sup>2</sup>See the *New Covenant* articles cited in note 1.

ences, and these can be applied to prophecy in the charismatic renewal. The second part of this article will exemplify this by applying St. Ignatius Loyola's guidelines for discernment of spirits to discerning individual prophecies. Others more familiar with different spiritual traditions are invited to make similar applications of other methods.<sup>3</sup>

### Scriptural Evidence of How Prophecies Are Discerned

Before we can say how prophecies are tested, we have to clarify which phenomena we are calling prophecy. In terms of Old and New Testament evidence, we mean prophecy in the strict scriptural sense, not the extended modern meaning applied to the messages of any outspoken critic of social abuses or of any proponent of socio-economic change. The widespread application in Scripture studies of this modern analogy, especially to Old Testament prophets, has often resulted in a reductionistic interpretation of prophecy as merely "reading the signs of the times." This description misses the very essence of prophecy, which is that the prophet is not speaking from his or her own experience or observation or wisdom. *The primary claim of the biblical prophet is that his or her message is directly from God.* It is God's word, not the prophet's, communicated to the prophet in revelation. The claim for prophecy, both in the Bible and today, is that it is the message of God, not of the speaker: "Thus says the Lord" or "My people, I call you to. . . ."

It is precisely this claim of prophecy to be God's word merely delivered by a human which requires discernment—and which precludes debate over whether such prophecies are too "gloomy" or "sanguine" a reading of the "signs of the times." Such subjective debates about the meaning of life and the times can be found in differing Old Testament *wisdom* traditions. But in the *prophetic* books, the issue is rather whether the word of the prophet is really God's message.

Since our concern is with testing Christian prophecy, our scriptural treatment is weighted toward New Testament prophecy; there is no room to give adequate treatment of Old Testament prophecy as viewed from the New Testament perspective and as illuminating the phenomena of Christian prophecy both in the New Testament and today.<sup>4</sup> Even our treatment of New Testament prophecy has to be limited mostly to Paul's discernment of proph-

<sup>3</sup>E.g., in *REVIEW FOR RELIGIOUS* 38 (1979), see "St. Theresa on Demonic Deception and Mystical Experience," pp. 346-61 by Francis X. Coleman and for a more generalized Catholic viewpoint, "Discernment of Spirits," pp. 382-98 by Dr. Barbara Albrecht.

An excellent survey from the Bible to today is *Discernment of Spirits* by Jacques Guillet et al. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1970). This is a translation of "Discernement des esprits," *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité Ascétique et Mystique* 3 (Paris, 1957) pp. 1222-91. The article's lengthy bibliographical references (with but few entries in English) are omitted from the translation.

<sup>4</sup>For historical surveys of the development of prophecy from the Old Testament to the early

hecies and to later Church departures from his approach.

Briefly, Christian prophecy in the New Testament is a special charismatic gift from God, primarily for the sake of the Christian community (as in 1 Corinthians and Revelation), but sometimes for the guidance of individuals as well (e.g., 1 Co 14:24-25 and the prophecies of Agabus to Paul in Ac 21:10-11). The Christian prophet acts as God's human instrument in receiving a revelation or message from God and relaying it to others.

New Testament prophecies have many of the same elements found in Old Testament and modern prophecies: exhortation, rebuke, revelation of the meaning of a situation or of God's will for it, visions, predictions, warnings, promises, etc. (see especially 1 Corinthians 12-14 and Revelation). As 1 Co 12-14 demonstrates unequivocally, Christian prophecy should function for the upbuilding of Christ's Body, bringing God's message to it for the present situation. The Church therefore has to make sure that the messages prophets give to it actually are from God.

Despite the differences between Old and New Testament prophecy, there is a continuity between them.<sup>5</sup> For example, Paul and the author of Revelation are both strongly influenced by Jeremiah. The Church's situation is indeed different from Israel's; Jesus is the definitive revelation from God, so prophets only speak as part of his Body and from his Spirit (see Heb 1:1-2 and Ac 2:33). Nevertheless, their pragmatic function in the churches continues to be to give God's fresh word to his people for their present situation. The Christian prophet inherits the role of exhorting the people in God's own words to obey God.

### *An Analogy Illustrating the Problem of Discerning Prophecies*

Before turning to Paul, perhaps a broad analogy might help clarify some problems innate not only to prophecy but to all religious experiences. In all such experiences, there is a human receptor, like a radio receiver (which of course is also created by God). In genuine prophecy, God is the source of the radio signal, but that signal is received according to the various human receivers that he made and chose, resonating differently in different instruments. The same radio signal can sound quite different coming from a large stereo system and from a small portable radio. All analogies have limitations, and this one fails to do justice to God's sovereignty, but it can illustrate how differences in prophetic style (like that between Jeremiah and Ezekiel) pertain primarily to the human instrument. Since God chooses prophets with many

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Church, see the previously mentioned (note 1) TDNT 6:781-861 and *IDB Sup.*, 694-702, and the literature cited.

<sup>5</sup>See in *Prophetic Vocation* . . . (note 1), Johannes Panagopoulos, "Die urchristliche Prophetie: Ihr Charakter und ihre Funktion," 1-32, p. 11, and Dieter Lührmann, "Jesus und seine Propheten. Gesprächsbeitrag," pp. 212-213.

different styles, the analogy suggests that the primary locus of discernment is not the style of the prophet but the message itself.

To extend our analogy, God is not the only transmitter of radio signals. Our human receivers also pick up signals from other sources besides God, such as other spirits or our own subconscious. The primary question for discernment is the origin of the prophetic message. Let us now see how Paul dealt with this issue.

### *Discernment of Prophecies From Paul to the Third Century*

Paul does not hesitate to judge the authenticity of individual prophecies. His letters to Corinth claim authority over all the Corinthians, including the prophets. They regulate how prophecy is to be used in the community. No prophecy or teaching, no matter from whom, is acceptable if it does not conform to Paul's apostolic directives.

For example, in 1 Co 11:2-16, Paul corrects the practice of Corinthian women who were praying and prophesying in church worship with heads uncovered (or hair unfixed). His decisive argument against this practice is finally just that neither Paul nor the other churches of God recognize such a custom (11:16). And in 1 Co 12-14, Paul regulates the use and proportion of all the charisms in community worship, including prophecy. He limits the number of prophecies to two or three and asks the others present to discern their authenticity.

It has been shown that Paul lists the charisms in matching pairs in 1 Co 12:8-10: the word of wisdom with the word of knowledge, faith with both gifts of healing and workings of miracles, prophecy with discernment of spirits, and tongues with interpretation of tongues.<sup>6</sup> That this pattern of clustering gifts is present, at least to some extent, is obvious. That this pairing extends to balancing discernment of spirits with prophecy is confirmed by chapter 14. Paul's whole discussion of charisms in chapters 12-14 culminates in the regulation of just the last charisms listed in 12:10, prophecy and tongues. Also his applied directives for prophecy are that only a few are to prophecy and the others are to discern (14:29, *diakrino*, the same Greek root as in discernment, *diakrisis*, of spirits in 12:10). This is directly parallel to his directive in the immediately preceding verses, 14:27-28, that only a few are to speak in tongues and others are to interpret the tongues. This evidence strongly suggests that in 12:10 we have the same pairings: tongues with interpretation, and prophecy with discernment of spirits. If this is so, then discernment of spirits

<sup>6</sup>Gerhard Dautzenberg, *Urchristliche Prophetie: Ihre Erforschung, ihre Voraussetzungen im Judentum und ihre Struktur im ersten Korintherbrief* (Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament Sechste Folge, 4; Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1975), pp. 122-148. See also his article in *Prophetic Vocation* . . . (note 1), "Botschaft und Bedeutung der urchristlichen Prophetie nach dem ersten Korintherbrief (2:6-16; 12-14)," p. 154.



in 12:10 must mean distinguishing which spirit is inspiring this prophecy (compare the roughly analogous 1 Co 12:3). For prophecy can be inspired by one's own spirit, or by an evil spirit, as well as by the Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

Paul subjects all charisms to the criterion of usefulness to the body and its diverse members, each subordinate to the body and in mutually beneficial interrelationship with the others (1 Co 12:12-31). Though the major problem in Corinth was misuse of tongues rather than prophecy, we can confidently assert that a prophecy which opposes the interests of the body is unthinkable for him. There must under no pretense be schism in the body (12:25). We can call this the ecclesiological norm for true prophecy, that it build up and not fragment the Church into schismatic sects.

In the Body of Christ, the Church, "God has placed first apostles, second prophets, third teachers," then "all the other charisms" (12:28), with tongues named last. It has been suggested that the order in this list includes a chronological aspect: first the apostles lay the church foundations by preaching the good news; secondly, building on these foundations, the prophets help the church to hear God's directives for its growth to maturity, especially in prophecies that call to obedience and reveal God's concrete will for the purpose and method of growth for this community; thirdly, the teachers explain to the community how to live out the directives from the prophecies and demonstrate how their Christian lives and experiences relate to the will of God as revealed in Scripture.<sup>8</sup> Then, on this sound basis of apostolic doctrine, obedience to God's concrete prophetic guidance for this particular church, and solid teaching, the other charisms of miracles, healings, helping, administrating, and tongues can make their contributions to the church body (12:28). At least in this context, it is clear that the first three—apostles, prophets, and teachers—are primary.

Both contemporary experience in the renewal and a comparison with 1 Co 2:6-16 indicate that prophecy is one of the major ways God calls a group beyond elementary conversion-preaching (the "milk" of "spiritual babes") into growth and maturity in the Christian life.<sup>9</sup> 1 Co 2:6-16 distinguishes teaching for the mature Christian from the initial Gospel messages treated in 1 Co 1:18-2:5. Neither the foundational wisdom of the cross, nor the advanced wisdom for mature Christians, is reducible to acquired human wisdom, but both are revealed wisdoms. 1 Co 3:1-4 make clear that Paul does not consider the Corinthians mature enough for the "solid food" of advanced Christian

<sup>7</sup>Church Fathers whose interpretation of "discernment of spirits" in 1 Co 12:10 confirm my view of it (as distinguishing which spirit is behind a prophecy) include John Chrysostom, Theodoret, Ambrosiaster and Origen. See Joseph Lienhard, S.J., "On 'Discernment of Spirits' in the Early Church," *Theological Studies* 41 (Sept., 1980), pp. 509-514. See also Hill, *NT Prophecy*, (note 1), pp. 133-134.

<sup>8</sup>Dautzenberg, "Botschaft . . . Prophetie," (note 6), pp. 157-158.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 157.

wisdom, which in 1 Co 2:6-12 he says he does impart to the mature.

And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit. The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Co 2:13-14, RSV)

It is likely that, for Paul, at least some of this wisdom is embodied in prophecies (e.g., see 1 Co 15:51-53), for he is clearly distinguishing revealed wisdom from human wisdom. And although such statements irritate "outsiders," Paul is clearly speaking of a knowledge that only those have who are open to the Spirit.

It is precisely such a gift of the Spirit, rather than human wisdom, that is needed to discern whether or not a given prophecy is genuine. Though such exclusive or elitist-sounding claims make some people uncomfortable, we cannot be ashamed of this fact of the spiritual life. From 1 Co 2:6-16 onward, spiritual discernment has been the universal principle of mystical and spiritual theology. Just as a small child lacks the experience to understand married love, so do many otherwise mature people lack the spiritual experience needed for spiritual discernment of prophecies. Like many other religious experiences, prophecy is something which only those who have experienced certain gifts of the Spirit or certain kinds of prayer or mystical gifts can understand. If people have not learned by experience in their private prayer to distinguish the Holy Spirit from their own spirit or from other spirits that influence their thoughts and impulses, they will be unable to judge the authenticity of prophecies, except when the latter violate some objective norm. For its proper exercise, therefore, prophecy requires spiritual maturity both in the prophet and in the body of people who discern the prophecy.

Paul's most explicit directions for how to deal with prophecies in a worship service come in 1 Co 14:26-40. This is the climax and application of all he has been saying in chapters 12-14. In these concrete regulations for order in the Corinthians' worship and use of charisms, Paul demonstrates his authority as head of the community to regulate even prophecy for the sake of the community for which he is responsible. He insists on obedience to himself, and on order in all charismatic manifestations. His basic principle is that "spirits of prophets are subject to prophets" (14:32); that is, under the prophets' rational control. In this respect, Christian prophecy contrasts with the pagan ecstasy familiar to the Corinthians, where prophets were controlled by the prophesying spirit within them. The closest Christian analogy to such control by a spirit is seen in people possessed by evil spirits who need exorcism before they can be free from their control (compare the mantic girl in Ac 16:16-21).

In a most important passage for the testing of prophecies, 1 Co 14:29-33, Paul gives orders that only two or three prophets are to speak out (in prophecies), and "the others" are to discern. It is unclear whether "the others" refers to the other prophets who do not speak out, or to the rest of the community.



Since the meaning is debated, we will have to consult the text in light of our own experience and of tradition and theology.

What is clear is that the text refers to two complementary gifts of the Spirit which are not human arts: to give a prophecy and to discern which spirit has inspired that prophecy. Although prophets can be expected also to have the gift of discernment, there is no reason to limit this gift only to prophets. Community leaders, who are responsible for the proper exercise of prophecy, also need the gift. And since all Christians experience the Holy Spirit, surely mature Christians could also seek and expect to receive the gift of discernment of spirits. In the charismatic renewal, this, in fact, is one of the major ways prophecies are discerned—by whether the Spirit within the mature members of the community and its leaders and prophets resonates to confirm in them the force of the spoken prophecy.

It must be noted that this way of discerning is a "subjective" method, and that subjective discernment corresponds to the subjective nature of prophecy itself. Aside from broad criteria like Scripture, dogma, edification of the Church, the fruits of the prophecy, and love, there are few "objective" standards for prophecy. Most of these objective criteria are not too hard to meet, and all of them together still do not give positive proof that any given saying is actually a prophecy from God. Besides this, many contemporary prophecies have a mixture of what is genuine with non-deliberate additions by the prophet. Ultimately, therefore, it is a question of being able to discern which spirit is speaking in the prophecy—the human spirit of the prophet, the Holy Spirit, or an evil spirit. Only those with a special, infused gift of discernment, or those who are used to distinguishing in their own lives the inspirations of the Holy Spirit from those of their own emotions or of evil spirits, will be able to distinguish which spirit is the source of any given prophecy.

It must be emphasized that Paul clearly expected mature Christians to be able to do this kind of discernment of spirits or he would not have told them to do so. It may also be that this is why he does not say much about *how* such discernment is done. He may have simply presumed his readers knew how. In any case, he tells the Corinthians to discern individual prophecies as they are given in the worshipping assembly. He was not afraid that in doing so he would be blaspheming against the Holy Spirit, as some second century writers feared. He does not tell the Corinthians to pick out trusted prophets and then accept as prophecy everything they say. Rather, he tells some to prophesy and the others to discern what they prophesy.

Paul's regulation of prophecy shows how important it is for prophets to obey church authority. As the primary authority in his church, Paul refused to recognize as a prophet anyone who disobeyed his orders and directions: "If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized" (1 Co 14:37-38).

For no one can be a genuine prophet without obedience to God, speaking

when and only when he or she is told to speak. And since the prophet is also a member of Christ's Body, the Church, he or she is also subject to the human authorities God has placed over the Church. One of the main functions of the prophet is to call the people to obey God's will. If prophets themselves were disobedient, even to the human authorities God has delegated, their lives would be a contradiction to their message of obedience. The prophets call the Church to God's order; they cannot themselves cause disorder. "For God is not a God of chaos but of peace" (1 Co 14:33).

Though Paul expected his communities to test each prophecy, some later churches were afraid to do so. The *Didache* or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, probably from about 100 A.D., betrays this fear. The churches for which it was written are told, "Do not test or examine any prophet who is speaking in a spirit, 'for every sin shall be forgiven, but this sin shall not be forgiven'" (*Didache* 11:7, Loeb).<sup>10</sup> They applied to prophecy the saying of Jesus that sins against the Holy Spirit shall not be forgiven, and feared they might be blaspheming if they tried to discern the prophecy. This prohibition is almost a direct contradiction of 1 Co 14:29, "and let the others examine" the utterances of the prophets. The same Greek word is used in both Did 11:7 and 1 Co 14:29, *examine* or *discern*. The *Didache* forbids what Paul commands.

I would also suggest that the strong warnings in the Apocalypse (e.g., Rv 22:18-19) against anyone who does not accept the words of the prophecy as they are may have aggravated the timidity of churches to discern individual prophecies. All they had left was the criterion of the prophet's life. Thus the *Didache* adds to its prohibition against examining prophecies: "But not everyone who speaks in a spirit is a prophet, except he have the behavior of the Lord" (*Did* 11:8, Loeb). People who gave self-serving prophecies or abused the churches' support of prophets to "traffic in Christ" were clearly false prophets (*Did* 11-13).

In the mid-second century, the *Shepherd of Hermas* also focuses on the prophet rather than on prophecies: "Test the man who has the Divine Spirit by his life" (*Herm.*, Mand. 11:7, Loeb).<sup>11</sup> A true prophet is meek, free from greed, keeps himself poor, does not prophesy on request (as at the Greek oracles). "Nor does he speak by himself (for the Holy Spirit does not speak when a man wishes to speak), but he speaks at that time when God wishes him to speak" (*Herm.*, Mand. 11:8, Loeb). The remarks in *Hermas* about when prophets come to a worshiping community have some affinities to 1 Corinthians.

Therefore, when the man who has the Divine Spirit comes into a meeting of righteous men who have the faith of the Divine Spirit, and intercession is made to God from the

<sup>10</sup>Kirsopp Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Vol 1 (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1912/1970), "Didache," pp. 303-333.

<sup>11</sup>Kirsopp Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Vol 2 (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1913/1965), "The Shepherd of Hermas," pp. 1-305.

assembly of those men, then the angel of the prophetic spirit rests on him and fills the man, and the man, being filled with the Holy Spirit, speaks to the congregation as the Lord wills (*Herm.*, Mand. 11:9, Loeb).

Ignoring as irrelevant *Hermas'* strange explanation of angels and Spirit, we have evidence here of how churches in worship prayed for prophecy until someone in the church was given one. *Hermas* claims a false prophet shuns such a worshipping assembly, and prophesies off in the corner to empty men. If such a person comes to a worshipping assembly, his earthly spirit is unable to speak and flees in fear (*Herm.*, Mand. 11:13-15). Whereas the Holy Spirit can speak with power in church worship, the earthly spirit has no power, because it comes from the devil (11:17-21). This is not too unlike the contemporary idea that mature community members will resonate with the power of genuine prophecies and be unmoved by non-prophecies. But the explicit focus remains on testing the prophet rather than the prophecy.

The subsequent history of the Church in the second and third centuries proved the inadequacy of testing only the prophet and not each prophecy. The result of such a policy, evident in the *Didache*, was to give "a blank check" to the "tested prophets." It left prophets too independent from the correction and guidance of church authorities. It did not account for the fact that a genuine prophet can become infected with pride because of his or her very prophetic gift. It did not provide for the possibility of delusion, since even tested prophets are tempted or can become too emotionally involved to distinguish their own emotions from God's inspiration.

As the Church's struggles with heresy increased, it had to put more emphasis on Scripture, on genuine tradition, and especially on the authority of bishops. It naturally de-emphasized charisms like prophecy which it found hard to regulate, and which were being so widely abused by heretics. In the second half of the second century, the apocalyptic prophetic heresy called Montanism arose and grew to become a major threat to the mainline churches. Their reaction of suppressing prophecy altogether was understandable. From the third century on, prophecy lost its important role in the primitive Church and has since been exiled to the peripheries of Church life. This historical development underlines how tragic was the reluctance by Christians after Paul to discern individual prophecies and to regulate them effectively.<sup>12</sup>

### Summary

Paul wanted his communities to have the spiritual maturity needed to be able to discern every prophecy given to the community. He did not hesitate to demand that every prophetic utterance be tested (see also 1 Th 5:19-22). The *Didache*, however, gives evidence that later churches became afraid to discern

<sup>12</sup>Heinrich Kraft, "Vom Ende der urchristlichen Prophetie," in *Prophetic Vocation* . . . (note-1), pp. 181-182.

individual prophecies by other than objective criteria. They feared that they might be sinning against the Holy Spirit if they discerned the actual prophecy. They seem to have lost the gift of discernment of spirits and limited themselves to the life of the prophet and to objective criteria, like whether the prophecies were self-serving to the prophet. The inability of the churches to regulate prophecy finally led to their suppressing prophecy from the important position it held in primitive Christianity.

## **Application of Ignatian Guidelines for Discernment**

### *Introduction*

Part I indicated both the necessity to discern all prophecies and the limits of scriptural advice on how to do that. Part II will seek in Church tradition for supplementary methods by which each prophecy can be discerned and yet be treated with reverence. It will concentrate mostly on suggestions from St. Ignatius Loyola for distinguishing good from evil spirits. These came from his extensive experience of the ways in which both God and evil spirits acted upon him.

Most spiritual writers, including Ignatius, were referring more to other mystical phenomena than to prophecies as described here, but remain pertinent to prophecy as another way God reveals himself to a human in religious experience. To return to our radio analogy, God can transmit many kinds of music but all are picked up by the same human receiver. Because these different ways of God's self-revelation have much in common, wisdom gained from one kind can with caution be applied to others.

For example, 1 Corinthians treats prophecy as one species of the genus of charisms that build up the Church body. General principles for using charisms to build up the body can be applied to the particular charism of prophecy. Thus the proper needs of the whole body, such as authority, order and harmony, regulate prophets as part of the body. Recognizing this, charismatic renewal communities teach that, as members of communities, prophets are subject to community authorities who are to pastor prophets as Paul pastored those in Corinth.

Another genus to which prophecy belongs is word-gifts, which also include inspired teaching and sharing and oral reading of Scripture. Many general pastoral principles apply to all four. For example, the rule-of-thumb "Stop when the anointing stops" applies whether one is prophesying, sharing, reading Scripture or teaching.

Because it belongs to the common genus of word-gifts, prophecy should be treated and used in conjunction with the others, since in all of them God speaks to his people. The Bible itself illustrates this point, because it includes books not only of revealed prophecy but also of wisdom which is based on human experience. Though not revelation, wisdom based on experience also has its origin in God, who has created all things and usually works through his creation. Therefore, when inspired by God, the non-revelatory word-gifts are

also God-given ways to instruct the community. They can teach the community how to implement a directive prophecy, or they can situate the prophecy in a broader context of Christian experience, Scripture, dogma, or the history of the Church.

The most important genus to which prophecy belongs, at least for finding methods to discern prophecies, is religious experience. Prophecy has much in common with other experiences, like hearing God in prayer, visions, mystical experience, inspirations and impulses to action. All of them require the discernment of which spirit is causing the experience so as to distinguish God's actions from those of another source. Many of the methods of discerning spirits that Christians have developed are applicable to discerning prophecies.<sup>13</sup>

Some confusion can arise from two different uses of the phrase, "discernment of spirits."<sup>14</sup> In 1 Co 12:10, it most probably means a supernatural gift which reveals which spirits are the source of a prophecy. In today's spiritual literature, it usually means a more natural kind of human wisdom based on centuries of experience of revelatory gifts in prayer. It is human insight on how to discern spirits, which is the result of much experience of charisms. From many experiences of God, as well as of delusions and temptations, these traditions of discernment of spirits draw conclusions, generalize from similar data, and elaborate methods which can be taught to others. This natural human discernment can and should supplement the direct revelatory charism of discernment of spirits in distinguishing authentic prophecy, especially since the latter charism is not always given in an unmistakable way for every prophecy.

### *Context of Listening Prayer*

For prophets and discerning communities to be able to distinguish the "voice" of God from other possible sources of prophecies, they must have learned how to recognize God's "voice" in habitual listening prayer. Prophets and discerners of prophecies must share the basic habit of listening for the Lord's guidance in all aspects of their daily lives, as well as of spending extended periods each day doing nothing else but listening to God in personal prayer. Without special times for prayer and also for self-examination, finding God's guidance in activities runs the risk of delusion.

<sup>13</sup>See Guillet, *Discernment of Spirits* (note 3). My main sources for the discernment methods of Ignatius are his "Rules for Perceiving the Different Movements Which are Caused in the Soul," and "Rules for the Greater Discernment of Spirits," (guidelines for discernment in the first and second weeks respectively of the Spiritual Exercises). The most helpful edition is David L. Fleming, S.J., *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: A Literal Translation and A Contemporary Reading* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978), which gives on parallel pages a literal translation and Fleming's paraphrase which functions as a commentary. In Fleming, the rules for discernment are found on pp. 202-219. The standard paragraph numbers are #313-336 in any major edition.

<sup>14</sup>Lienhard, "Discernment," (note 7), p. 520 and *passim*.



Uninterrupted times of solitary prayer give us space for the reflection on our experience needed to learn to distinguish which prompting and idea comes from God and which from ourselves or from temptation. In prayer time, we learn discernment of spirits by evaluating movements of consolation, desolation, distraction and dryness that affect us as we try to listen to God's direction in our daily lives, in our hopes and fears, in Scripture, or in dreams. As we practice this daily listening prayer and discernment over months and years, we discover the patterns of how we personally experience God's invitations and how we are tempted. We develop a connatural sense or "a feel" for what these good and evil promptings feel like when we experience them in everyday events.

This ability to be able to "feel" the difference between God's invitation and our own impulses or temptations, which is obviously delicate and requires considerable experience and continual checking with others to avoid mistakes, is extremely important for testing prophecies. It enables us to know, *even while the event is going on*, which spirit is leading us. It gives us the kind of instant discernment needed when a prophecy is spoken at a prayer meeting.

Thus, although our attention is focused on the prophecy or event itself, we also become more attuned to the movements within us which accompany it. While keeping our conscious attention on the event or prophecy, our awareness of the movements within us, as we resonate to the event or prophecy, can alert us to which spirits are affecting us. Movements such as accompanying consolation, peace, love, and other "fruits of the Spirit" indicate in the midst of the event that God is moving us. Contrary movements like repugnance for good, anxiety, anger or impatience warn us that we are in a situation of temptation needing some kind of deliberate choice.

To take an example from an event, I may know I need exercise. But frequently when it is time to take it, I "do not feel like it" and think of many "good" reasons to "postpone" it. Experience has shown me these feelings of repugnance and rationalization are almost always temptation. Therefore, the way to be faithful to God's will for me is to disregard or even act against these feelings of repugnance by exercising as I had planned to. In a similar way, we can grow in our ability to tell by our reactions when we hear a prophecy whether we are being addressed by God or not. At the time the prophecy is given we can either confirm it as a whole or in part, or we can make a preliminary judgment that it is not from God. There is no time in the prayer meeting for protracted thinking about the prophecy, but awareness of our feelings can give us immediate clues to its origins.

### *Consolation and Desolation as Signs*

Thus true prophecy will tend to produce *consolation* in the praying listeners. Consolation does not mean just "good feelings," but any increase of faith, hope or love, peace, genuine sorrow and repentance for our sins, ease in and desire for serving God—in short, anything that makes it easier for us to love



and serve God.

Words that are innocent non-prophecy, the kind of mistake beginners in prophecy often make, will often produce no effect at all in the discerning community.

Delusions uttered as prophecy and false prophecy will tend to produce in the spiritual listener a feeling of *desolation*. Desolation is the opposite of consolation, and includes anything that makes it harder to love and serve God, or which distracts people from God's genuine will for them. Desolation can come from many sources (e.g., "the world, the flesh and the devil"), even physical malady or personal resistance to God's call. But since in any form it tends to hamper our following God, it requires examination and usually resistance. Examples of desolation include uneasiness and lack of peace, anxiety, fear, anger, self-condemning guilt leading to despair, self-righteous pride or judgment of others, difficulty in working, praying, loving or doing what we ought, distractions, temptations and attraction to what is base and less good than God's will for us.

When we experience such movements, we should be warned that we are being tempted. The cause could be the dubious prophecy itself. Or it could be our own lack of openness to what the prophecy is saying. We may not know which is the case at first, but we are alerted to discern the question carefully. If further reflection indicates that the prophecy itself caused the desolation in us, and quick consulting with others and leaders can help here, we are warned that the prophecy is not to be heeded. If we become aware that our own sinfulness or disobedience is the cause of the desolation within us, then we listen even more carefully to what was said.

Since the devil often acts as an angel of light, false prophecy can initially sound good, but the ultimate effect is to confuse the community's goals, to lead them into discouragement or pride, or to distract them from a direction which God has already clearly indicated. For example, at a time when God has insistently been calling a specific community to faithful personal prayer, repentance, the setting of family and professional lives in order, and growth to maturity in community sharing, a prophecy that confuses the issue by calling the members immediately to become a covenant community or a source of mighty healings may well be satanic deception.

Another example is a prophecy that calls the community to individual repentance and to rooting out certain habits or actions from their lives. If it is a true prophecy, it will usually be heard by the members with the consolation of their being convicted, both of God's love for them, and of their failures to respond and therefore evoke sorrow for their sins. It will arouse them to want to change, improve their lives, and grow closer to God. If it is an inculpable non-prophecy, it will probably have little affect on those mature in prayer and discernment. But a deceptive prophecy will often lead to feelings of guilt, such as "I'm no good." Its tendency will be toward despair, an attitude of "What's the use of trying?" The listeners do not feel themselves called back to God, but

condemned and hopeless. They are drawn to quit trying, which is a clear sign of temptation.

To summarize, in our daily prayer and discerning which of our internal movements are from good and which from evil source, we learn what those various spirits feel like when they act on us. Then, when we as prophets feel them while we are being prompted to speak a word, we can follow, or reject, the prompting and the word as we discern whether or not its origin is from God. And when we, as a discerning community, hear prophecies, we can similarly be guided to know by how they affect us whether or not they are from God.

Besides the immediate discernment of how to respond here and now to a word given in a prayer meeting, some important directive prophecies require more extensive testing and prolonged response. The previously mentioned Rome prophecies calling for change of life in preparation for coming hard times is an example. After the initial discernment that a major directive prophecy is authentic, the communities must then pray and discern how it is to be implemented, and begin to act. I do not think one can adequately discern directive prophecies without obedience. This means that the first prerequisite for discerning directive prophecy must be a basic attitude of freedom from inordinate attachments and of habitual obedience and willingness to follow wherever God leads, no matter what it costs.

Secondly, if the prophecy seems to be genuine, continued discernment of it requires obediently doing what it directs. As communities walk into these directives and live them out, the fruits of obeying the prophecy become apparent. As in cooking, so in prophecy, "the test is in the eating." The best way to test a prophecy that is not clearly spurious is to obey it and see what happens. In this way, our testing of prophecy avoids what the early Church feared, "sinning against the Holy Spirit." In our testing we continue to manifest our reverence and obedience to the demands of God's word over our independence in the very process of discerning the true from the counterfeit. Otherwise, the call to discern prophecies risks becoming a cloak for our own unwillingness to change, and for our own disobedience towards God's word to us.

For example, I believe that charismatic covenant communities have shown an exemplary willingness to obey prophecies without counting their cost. If our own lives have not undergone similar radical change, at least in attitudes, since being influenced by God's deeper calls to us, we might very well question our criticisms of those whose lives do demonstrate this obedience.

To extend this example, as covenant communities continue to live out the directions indicated by the Rome prophecies, they have to keep on discerning the fruits of their activities to insure that they continue to interpret the consequences of those prophecies correctly. In their living out of the prophecies, new consequences, difficulties, and situations arise which also must be discerned and interpreted. In other words, obeying a prophecy is a form of "walking in the Spirit," and requires that same kind of continuous discernment.

As soon as the mark of sin, evil, selfishness, pride or the devil appears, we have to backtrack to where the genuine inspiration left off and get back on course. Meanwhile, we learn from our mistakes and detours how we are vulnerable to misinterpreting the thoughts and feelings in our human "receiver." We learn how to recognize more clearly the difference between God's guidance and the deceitful imitations of other spirits, including our own.

Sometimes the deception in a prophecy is quite subtle. It sounds good initially, but only later does the community find itself led astray or less able to respond to God. When leaders fail to detect the deception earlier, they can still discover it later as they continue to discern what is happening in and to the community.

The procedure of discernment is then similar to that of an individual who has been deceived in his or her prayer or action. The leaders and discerning bodies should trace the course of community developments from their ending in the "serpent's tail" back to the point at which trouble first began. What was the pseudo-good that distracted them from God's path for them? When did they start to notice effects that were drawing the community away from God? What were the signs of desolation, and when did they begin? Just as individuals are to grow in discernment of spirits by learning from their mistakes, so must communities. Past experiences of being deceived make us more mature and discerning in the future, so that the delusion can become a "happy fault." We are actually better off for having erred in good faith than we would have been in "burying our talent" and doing nothing. Therefore, we need not be afraid either to prophesy or to heed, discern and obey prophecies, if we use our mistakes to grow in maturity and discernment of spirits.

St. Ignatius had a good deal of personal experience both of powerful revelatory gifts from God, and of deceptions and delusions. The Church at his time was also plagued by false mystics, such as the *Alumbrados*. From such experience, Ignatius proposed a basic rule which confirms the suggestions already made about discerning every prophecy. His most basic conviction was that each and every religious experience (which would therefore include prophecy) must be discerned.

The only experience that without doubt originates from God is what Ignatius calls "consolation without previous cause," since only God can speak directly to the human soul without using its senses, verbalizations, or imagination or using other psychic or human intermediaries. Prophecy can be this kind of unmediated experience of God.

But even this kind of experience must be carefully discerned, for Ignatius knows that after God's action on the soul ceases, the human subject can continue in a state of "afterglow" in which it continues to have thoughts, formulate decisions, and so forth. These "afterglow" insights must not be confused with the initial revelation or action by God.

The relevance of this guideline for prophets lies in their need to be careful not to confuse their "afterglow" thinking with the prophecy itself. It also

means that they must not deliver as prophecy anything extra beyond the prophecy itself. This is another way of saying they must not go beyond their anointing: "Stop when the anointing stops."

A common fault in my experience of prayer meetings is the desire of prophets (and others) to find an "appropriate ending" for their message, which carries them off into their own verbalizations. Prophets can also get carried away by emotion and rhetoric, neither of which are in themselves God's revelation, but may belong instead to the "afterglow."

The Ignatian conviction of the need to test every religious experience corresponds to Paul's approach to prophecy rather than to that in the *Didache*. Ignatius would not simply trust a "tested prophet." This raises a question about the conclusion Bruce Yocum (in *Prophecy*) draws from the practice of the early Church. Yocum rightly says that most Church practice concerned testing prophets rather than prophecies.<sup>15</sup> But our survey shows that this was against Paul's practice, and suggests that it was motivated by a fear of sinning against the Spirit. Testing only prophets was not sufficient to curb abuses of prophecy and finally resulted in suppression of prophecy from the mainstream of the Church. Like Paul, the later Church, including Ignatius, insists rather that every private revelation be subject to the discernment of the Church.

Both Paul and Ignatius would have serious reservations about the conclusion Yocum draws from his correct observation of early Church practice: "The fact that a person was known to be a true prophet in itself constituted significant evidence that any prophecy he spoke was divinely inspired" (pp. 64-65). Although admittedly this is "significant evidence," it is by no means sufficient evidence. It is significant enough to cause the Church leaders to take the statement so seriously that they submit it to careful discernment. But Church history is full of examples of people who started as true mystics or prophets and later, through pride in their genuine gifts, fell away into falsehood. Any individual, no matter how gifted or mature, can err on individual occasions, especially those in which he or she is emotionally involved.

One might argue that Church authorities and mystics like Ignatius, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross were pushed by abuses into being over-cautious in accepting revelations as from God. But one must admit that the same abuses happen today. It would be rash to fly in the face of this consensus of the great mystics and of the Church, that no matter who the mystic or prophet, each and every revelation is to be subjected to careful discernment. Let us not go back to making the same mistakes the early Church made, and later rued and corrected. Let us learn and avoid the danger in simply trusting "tested prophets," especially since we now have helpful methods for discerning prophecies which were not available to the second and third century Church.

Rather, let us apply discernment principles to three areas of prophetic

<sup>15</sup>Yocum, *Prophecy*, (note 1), p. 64.

experience: (1) promptings to give a prophecy, (2) the message itself as received by the prophet, and (3) the discernment process of the listening community.

(1) *Promptings to give a prophecy.* As our analogy of radio signals from several stations suggests, the impulse to prophesy can come from sources other than God. A familiar example are people whose needs for attention and self-worth drive them to give "prophecies." The test of a prophet's life can alert us to this possibility.

The strong emotional and physical agitations prophets often experience when prompted to prophesy must therefore be discerned. Commonly mentioned manifestations like excitement, pounding of hearts, perspiration, being "worked up inside," and feeling hot pertain more to the human instrument's resonance than to the divine signal to which it is responding. In our radio analogy, such manifestations are like heat generated in a radio from being played.

Also, these manifestations have other possible causes besides divine action. Often human fear of speaking to a large group can cause such sweating and pounding of heart. Neither the state of excitation of the prophet nor strong rhetorical emphasis and repetition in the spoken prophecy are sure authentications of prophecy. Yet, in my experience, they have been frequently used to justify non-prophecy. Leaders should not accept the reason, "I just had to speak this or I would have burst." Paul said the spirits of Christian prophets are under the prophets' control (1 Co 14:32). An important test on prophetic impulses is obedience to the order of the community, meeting, Mass, or directives of the leaders. Even when people have genuine prophecies, they are still responsible for delivering them at the proper time and in an appropriate manner.

Prophets have to watch out for feelings like irritation, impatience or anger that they were not allowed to prophesy, for these are not from the Holy Spirit. When Paul directed the Corinthians to let only two or three prophets speak, he was certainly aware that there might be more prophecies than that. The emotional or nervous side effects of even genuine prophecy can be painful to the prophet, but his or her feelings have to be subordinated to the common good. Responding fully to previous prophecies, and not overloading the capacities of the community to absorb prophecies, may often require that a limit be put on even genuine prophecies in any one meeting.

Finally, prophets must be careful that they are not in a state of desolation when they are being prompted to prophesy. If they are preoccupied, confused, tempted, anxious, angry or the like, it is hard for them to hear God's voice clearly. This is like heavy static in radio reception during an electrical storm. During the storms of temptation which all people have, they should not try to speak prophecy unless the static stops at least momentarily and they *know* they are hearing the Lord's signal. Otherwise they could be speaking out of their own anger, frustration or impatience rather than from God's impulse.



On occasions when a genuine prophecy comes to someone who has been in desolation, the desolation will be gone at least while the person is receiving the prophecy. But it is possible that if there is no immediate chance to deliver the prophecy, one's desolation may return and the person may then be unable to tell divine promptings to speak from his or her negative emotions. Concern for authentic prophecy would then seem to suggest silence by the person until the desolation passes.

(2) *The message itself as received by the prophet.* The prophets themselves should apply the discernment of spirits to their messages before they deliver them. While they listen to the prophecy itself, they should concomitantly be aware of how they are resonating to it. Are their feelings of consolation or desolation? Then, when they ask themselves whether this prophecy is meant to be given to this group on this occasion, they should again be attentive to whether they resonate with consolation or desolation. From their habitual prayer and discernment they will then be able to decide to give the prophecy or not. It is obvious that the ability to do this requires maturity in habitual prayer and discernment of spirits in one's daily life. Prophets who do not give evidence of a mature prayer-life or discernment should be helped to develop such maturity before giving public prophecy. Prophecy is not a game to be played by spiritual children. Without maturity there is almost certain to be trouble.

(3) *Discernment of prophecy by the community.* This has already been treated, but we can repeat and summarize as we conclude. The same kind of spiritual maturity needed for discernment of spirits in daily life and prayer is also required to discern whether a prophecy is genuine or not. Consolation and desolation are the primary subjective clues. Sometimes, when deceptions are more subtle and are only detected later, then the discerning body should trace the course of its thoughts until it discovers where the deception began.

## Conclusion

It is hoped that these suggestions from St. Ignatius will be helpful in the process of discerning the authenticity of genuine prophecies. Others may use the wisdom of other spiritual traditions. But the basic Pauline principle is essential: not only the prophets, but every single prophetic utterance must be treated. Only discernment of every prophecy can give adequate protection against spurious prophecy.